Phil 4: Intro Ethics
Handout #3

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Mill's Utilitarianism

I. Three Branches of Ethics

1. *Normative Ethics*: the study and development of systems of right and wrong—systems of rules, principles or procedures for figuring out what one should do and should not do (morally speaking).

> Examples of normative ethical systems: Utilitarianism, Kantian or Deontological Ethics, Virtue Ethics, Religious Moralities (e.g. Judeo-Christian law, Islamic code, etc.), Transcendentalism

2. *Ethical Motivation* (or Moral Psychology): the study of the source of moral obligation—an evaluation of answers to the questions "Why do people act morally (when they do)?" and "Why should we be Moral?"

> Examples of theories of moral motivation: a) Religious—we are or should be moral because God wants us to be moral, or loves what is right; b) Teleological—we are or should be moral because the function of people is to be moral, people are "malfunctioning" when they act immorally; c) Rational—we should be moral because (Hobbes) in the long run immorality is contrary to our own "selfish" interests or (Kant) immoral motives involve some sort of inconsistency or incoherence.

3. *Meta-ethics*: the study of the ontological status of (normative) ethical systems— evaluates answers to the questions "Are there facts about what is wrong and what is right?" "If there are such facts, what *makes* something wrong or right?" "How did certain things *come to be* good and other things *come to be* bad?" "What is the relation between moral facts—e.g. facts about what is good or bad—and more ordinary facts about the physical world—e.g. facts about what people actually think and do?" "Are there any moral facts that are universal in scope, or are all acts right at some places and times and wrong at others?"

> Examples of meta-ethical positions: Expressivism, Nihilism, Projectivism (or Anti-Realism), Realism, and Relativism.

II. Utilitarianism

A. Utilitarianism is a normative ethical view: it consists in the Principle of Utility which is a *First Principle* of morality. The Principle of Utility tells us what we should do or, in Mill's formulation, what it is right to do and what it is wrong to do.

> **The Principle of Utility** ("the greatest happiness principle"): actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.

Mill's initial definition of 'happiness': "by 'happiness' is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by 'unhappiness', pain and the privation of pleasure."

B. In *Utilitarianism*, Mill addresses questions from all three branches of ethics described above. Here's an overview:

* In **chapter 1** he explains what a *first principle* of morality is and argues that morality must have a first principle.

* In **chapter 2** he argues that the principle of utility is the first principle of morality. He then does two more things: first he tries to explain the principle of utility by giving some sort of an account of happiness; then he defends the claim that the principle of utility is the first principle of morality from some objections. Thus, in chapter 2, Mill is concerned with advancing and defending a position in normative ethics.

* In **chapter 3** Mill turns to questions of moral motivation, and asks "What are the motives or reasons we have for obeying the principle of utility?" That is, why do we act benevolently (when we do) and *why* should we act so as to maximize the happiness produced by our actions?

* In **chapter 4** Mill addresses meta-ethical concerns. He tries to prove that the principle of utility is *true*—that it is a *fact* that we should act so as to promote happiness, and he tries to say something about what sort of fact this is and how it is connected to more ordinary sorts of facts—here facts about what normal people actually desire.

* In **chapter 5** Mill returns to normative ethics and addresses the most important kind of objection to Utilitarianism—the claim that it cannot account for considerations of justice or rights. This criticism is often made by saying that Utilitarianism implies that we are sometimes obligated to violate the rights of innocent people.

III. Chapter 1: What is a first principle? Why must morality have one?

A. Phrases Mill uses interchangeably with 'first principle': 'the criterion of right and wrong', 'the summum bonum', 'the foundation of morality', a 'test of right and wrong', and 'an ultimate standard'.

Mill's argument for the necessity of a first principle of morality:

B. Most sciences—or branches of inquiry—are not based on first principles. Contrary to some appearances algebra is not based on axioms: "algebra derives none of its certainty from what are commonly taught to learners as its elements, since these. . .are as full of fictions as English law, and of mysteries as theology."

C. But morality and its development is a "practical art." It doesn't just tell us how things are, and how they will be, it tells us *how we should make things be*. It provides us with rules of action, and rules of action tell us how to act so as to achieve some end or goal. But then how can we evaluate competing rules of action unless we know what goal we should try to achieve?

"When we engage in a pursuit, a clear and precise conception of what we are pursuing would seem the first thing we need, instead of the last we are to look forward to. A test of right and wrong must be the means, one would think, of ascertaining what is right or wrong, and not a consequence of having already ascertained it."

Mill then admits that we needn't have a first principle if we have some way of **ranking** principles in order or importance or force. He then makes a curious remark about how we would know we had uncovered such a first-principle. "There ought either to be some fundamental principle or law at the root of all morality, or, if there be several, there should be a determinate order of precedence among them, and the one principle, or the rule for deciding between the various principles when they conflict, ought to be *self-evident*."

[Notice here the slide from a) a *decision procedure*—like ranking principles, and always following the principle with a higher rank, to b) a *moral principle* by which one decides between the various competing rules.]

Question: Is the principle of utility a good candidate for a self-evident truth? Is it a principle that you can tell is true simply by understanding its meaning?

IV. Chapter 2: Describing and Defending the Principle of Utility

The principle of utility says that acts are good when they promote happiness and prevent suffering and bad when they promote pain and diminish happiness. But we need to know at least three things if we are to have a determinate grasp of the principle.

Question 1. What is happiness?

Question 2. Whose happiness matters? (Whose happiness should we consider when we're applying the principle of utility? How much weight should we give to the happiness of the various people affected?)

Question 3. What is meant by 'promotion'? Are we simply required to take steps to increase happiness or must we seek to maximize happiness? Should we seek to maximize aggregate happiness or average happiness?

In regard to #2, Mill says that the happiness of (a) "all sentient creatures," should be counted for something, and says that the pleasures and pains of (at least) each person should be counted equally; "the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right conduct is not the agent's own happiness but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator." (Notice here that if one's own happiness is not to be valued above the happiness of others it can hardly be argued that the happiness of one's loved ones can be counted as more important than the happiness of others. Can it? This gives rise to Singer's strong principle of benevolence.)

In regard to #3, Mill says the ultimate end is the *maximization* of *aggregate* happiness.

In regard to #1 Mill develops a qualitative view of pleasure and pain according to which *some pains count more than others*. To compare the relative weight (or importance) of a pleasure Mill suggests the following test,

> "Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure. If one of the two is, by those who are competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it, even though knowing it to be attended with a greater amount of discontent, and would not resign it for any quantity of other pleasure which their nature is capable of, we are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a superiority in quality so far outweighing quantity as to render it, in comparison, of small account."

Mill is confident that the pleasures which will emerge from this test as higher in value (and thus "worth more" in a utilitarian calculus) will be the "noble" pleasures, the pleasures one derives from the use of one's "higher faculties."

> **Three questions**: Is Mill's prediction about the outcome of such a test correct? Is such a test a good determiner of the degrees of pleasure or happiness that should figure in application of the principle of utility? Does the qualitative view of happiness undercut the standing of the principle of utility as a *first* principle of morality?

Rule Utilitarianism vs. Act Utilitarianism (as normative principles or "commands")

> **Normative Act Utilitarianism:** At any given time you should perform one of the actions then available to you just in case it will lead to at least as much aggregate happiness as would any other action available to you at that time.

> **Normative Rule Utilitarianism**: (1) Your actions should conform to a set of moral rules, and (2) You should act only on those *rules* the adoption of which would lead to the greatest aggregate happiness.

Mill seems to accept some version of Normative Rule Utilitarianism in at least this respect: he doesn't think it's practical for us to go around applying the principle of utility when we're faced with particular decisions. You should not decide what to do by figuring out which of the actions available to you is likely to maximize aggregate happiness. So there's a sense in which it is not the case that we should apply the principle of utility to particular cases. We should instead apply it to rules.

> "To consider the rules of morality as improvable is one thing: to pass over the intermediate generalization entirely and endeavor to test each individual action directly by the first principle is another. It is a strange notion that the acknowledgment of a first principle is inconsistent with the admission of secondary ones" (Mill, 24).

Note that here Mill provides another role for a first principle of morality. A first principle is supposed to allow for *moral progress* or the development of our moral system. It is supposed to provide an antidote to *conservatism*. (Question: what are the other two functions?)

Mill might still be an Act Utilitarian in thinking that what *makes an act morally good* is whether it in fact maximizes utility.

Rule Utilitarianism vs. Act Utilitarianism (as evaluative principles or claims about what is morally best or most valuable)

> **Evaluative Act Utilitarianism:** The morally best actions for an agent A to perform at a time t are those actions that will lead to at least as much aggregate happiness as any other action available to A at t.

> **Evaluative Rule Utilitarianism**: (1) The morally best actions for an agent A to perform at a time t are those actions that conform to the morally best set of moral rules, and (2) The morally best set of moral rules are those rules the adoption of which would lead to the greatest aggregate happiness.

Suppose that Mill accepts Evaluative Act Utilitarianism and Normative Rule Utilitarianism: Mill thinks that the morally good actions are those that lead to the most aggregate happiness, but he thinks we should follow moral rules, not apply the principle of utility in every particular case. Then Mill is committed to the hypothesis that *we will in fact produce more utility if we act on lesser moral rules than we will if we apply the principle of utility directly.*

> "According to the Greatest Happiness Principle. . .the ultimate end, with reference to and for the sake of which all other things are desirable (whether we are considering our own good or the good of other people), is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality. . .This being, according to the utilitarian opinion, the end of human action, is necessarily also the standard of morality; which may accordingly be defined, the rules and precepts for human conduct, by the observance of which an existence such as has been described might be, to the greatest extent possible, secured to all mankind; and not to them only, but, so far as the nature of things admits, to the whole sentient creation" (p. 59).

A Putative Problem with Rule Utilitarianism: Suppose my friend is hiding out in my house when a killer comes to the door looking for him. My not lying is presumably bad in this case and I should lie. Normative and Evaluative Act Utilitarianism produces these results. But "Never lie" is a rule that would presumably be among those that would lead to the greatest overall happiness if *everyone* adopted these

rules in part because "Never murder," would also be among these rules. So must the Normative Rule utilitarian say I should not lie? Must the Evaluative Rule Utilitarian say it would be best if I told the truth?

> How might Mill respond to this problem given his view that the principle of utility has a role to play in settling conflicts between moral principles?

V. Chapter 3: Moral Motivation

1. Ordinary moral rules bind us because we have been "trained" (by education and opinion) to follow them. But since we were not brought up as utilitarians we do not regard the principle of utility with a "feeling" of obligation. This might lead us to think that we need a reason if we are to accept that we should promote general happiness, but that we do not need a reason "not to rob or murder, betray or deceive" (p. 26). But this is wrong. If we need a reason to follow the one moral principle we need a reason to follow any moral principle.

2. The reasons for following the dictates of ordinary morality are also reasons for adopting the principle of utility. They are both *internal* and *external*:

> *external*: the hope of favor and the fear of displeasure of others (including, possibly, some God).
>
> *internal*: a feeling of conscience "which in properly cultivated moral natures" arises and is strong enough to make immoral action too "painful" to perform.

Question: are these good *reasons* for acting morally, or are they only *causes* of moral behavior?

3. Mill's reply to the moral skeptic: "Undoubtedly this sanction has no binding efficacy on those who do not possess the feelings it appeals to; but neither will these persons be more obedient to any other moral principle than the utilitarian one" (Mill, 28). "How can the will to be virtuous, where it does not exist in sufficient force, be implanted or awakened? Only by making the person desire virtue—by making him think of it in a pleasurable light, or of its absence in a painful one. It is by associating the doing right with pleasure, or the wrong with pain, or by eliciting and impressing and bringing home to the person's experience the pleasure naturally involved in the one or the pain in the other, that it is possible to call forth that will to be virtuous which, when confirmed, acts without any thought of either pleasure or pain."

VI. Chapter 4 (Meta-ethics): The proof of Utilitarianism

As utilitarianism is a theory about what is most desirable—or what is desirable in itself, it does not admit of a proof in the standard sense. Still, "The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible is that people actually hear it; and so of the other sources of our experience. In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable is that people do actually desire it."

Initial Question: The principle of utility says we *ought to* maximize happiness (or it "commands" us to maximize happiness). But Mill sets out to show that happiness is most *desirable* (or the only thing desirable in itself). What is the missing step? Answer: that we ought to maximize that which is most desirable. Can we give an argument to support this missing step? Does it need an argument in its support?

* Claim: Happiness is the only thing desirable in itself.

Possible counter-example: virtue. Don't people desire virtue no less than pleasure or happiness?

* Response: Compare love of virtue with love of money.

"What for example, shall we say of the love of money? There is nothing originally more desirable about money than about any heap of glittering pebbles. Its worth is solely that of the things which

it will buy; the desires for other things than itself, which it is a means for gratifying. Yet the love of money is not only one of the strongest moving forces of human life, but money is, in many cases, desired in and for itself; the desire to possess it is often stronger than the desire to use it, and goes on increasing when all the desires which point to ends beyond it, to be compassed by it, are falling off. It may then, be said truly that money is desired not for the sake of an end, but as part of the end. . .

What was once desired as an instrument for the attainment of happiness has come to be desired for its own sake. In being desired for its own sake it is, however, desired as *part* of happiness. The person is made, or thinks he would be made, happy by its mere possession; and is made unhappy by failure to obtain it. The desire of it is not a different thing from the desire of happiness any more than the love of music or the love of health. They are included in happiness. They are some of the elements of which the desire of happiness is made up. Happiness is not an abstract idea but a concrete whole; and these are some of its parts. And the utilitarian standard sanctions and approves of their being so. . .

Virtue, according to the utilitarian conception, is a good of this description. There was no original desire of it, or motive to it, save its conduciveness to pleasure, and especially to protection from pain. But through the association thus formed it may be felt a good in itself, and desired as such with as great intensity as any other good. . .

It results from the following considerations that there is in reality nothing desired except happiness. Whatever is desired otherwise than as a means to some end beyond itself, and ultimately to happiness, is desired as itself a part of happiness, and is not desired for itself until it has become so. . .

if human nature is so constituted as to desire nothing which is not either a part of happiness or a means of happiness—we can have no other proof, and we require no other, that these are the only things desirable."

Three questions:

(1) Even if we grant Mill the premise that we ought to promote what is most desirable, has Mill shown that we should (a) *maximize* happiness or only that we should (b) *promote some* happiness? Could a rational egoist (or someone who defends the rationality of acting selfishly) use this argument to support his own position?

(2) Is the notion of happiness Mill uses in this argument the same notion he uses in explaining the principle of utility? If not, does this present a problem for his argument?

(3) Does the fact that happiness is desirable follow from the fact that everyone desires happiness? (See Mill's comparison of his project with proving that something is visible by showing that people see it.) Does 'desirable' mean ***is*** *desired* or, instead, ***should be*** *desired*?